

Book review

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Francois Nsengiyumva, **The Role of the Church in the Development of the Third World: A Theological Reflection on Paul's Epistle to the Romans**, Chancellor College Publications, 2011, pp 351. ISBN: 978 – 99960 – 23 – 11 – 8

Francois Nsengiyumva is an ordained Anglican priest teaching Biblical Studies at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. In his home country, Rwanda, he served as a parish priest and held several important positions in the church. As a parish priest he had personal experience of poverty. The poverty of the Rwandan priest was, however, in sharp contrast to the higher living standards of the expatriate missionaries whose needs were well catered for by missionary societies in their home countries. The differential living standards between local priests and missionaries generated tension between the two parties. The unequal treatment of local priests and expatriate missionaries within the Anglican Church made him wonder whether the local priest did not have a right to a decent life (p 4).

The book is an attempt to understand why certain sections of society in a country or entire societies enjoy high living standards, while others remain in abject poverty. Although it focuses on the Anglican priest in Rwanda, the author believes that the observations he makes of the privileged situation of expatriate missionaries vis á vis local priests can be extended to the relationship that exists between developed countries and the third world, predominantly made of former colonies. It is organized in eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides the context which provided the motivation for writing the book, namely the personal experience of poverty and the apparent indifference of the church leadership to it. He likens the tension between local priests and expatriate missionaries to that which existed in the Christian community at Rome which was made up of Jews and Gentiles. It is to this community that St Paul addresses his message of mutual acceptance. St Paul believed that the message of mutual acceptance and respect, if properly understood and applied, would reduce the tension in the community of believers which the arrogance and self-importance of the Jews generated. The author believes the same message could help improve

relationships, not only between local priests and expatriate missionaries in the Rwandan Anglican Church, but also between developed countries and third world countries emanating from ‘unequal development’.

Chapters 2 – 7 review the debates surrounding the authorship of the letter, when it was written, its intended audience and message and how the chapters relate to one another. Since those issues have already been settled by biblical scholars and the author does not challenge the conclusions that were reached, the review becomes an unnecessary repetition. It would appear that the author wants to reinforce the claim that St Paul authored the letter and was addressing a specific community of believers in Rome experiencing tension because of differences in ethnic origins.

Chapter 8 dwells on what should be the appropriate relationship for the achievement of development. In this chapter the author moves away from blaming the indifference of the church leadership and machinations of expatriate missionaries for the poverty of the local priest, to his existence in a larger context of international relations which allow one part of the world to advance and another to suffer economic stagnation. The appropriate relationship for development, the author argues, is one based on mutual acceptance, where the strong help the weak become stronger. In the context of economic relationships between countries this mutually supportive relationship entails that developed countries help the poor countries to develop themselves through the injection of aid, removal of trade barriers and an easing of the external debt (p.309). This should be devoid of any conditionalities such as good governance and democracy as the situation is at present (p. 314).

By helping poor Third World countries to develop themselves, the developed countries will be acknowledging their moral responsibility for the economic transformation of these countries whose spontaneous development they had thwarted through the imposition of various policies, laws and ideologies (p. 310). The author believes that the *Letter to the Romans*, especially Romans 12:12, provides an adequate foundation for the mutually beneficial relationship between the developed countries and poor third world countries, including Rwanda, that he envisages.

In the *Letter to the Romans* Paul challenges the Jews that God does not exist for them alone but also for believers of Gentile origin. Salvation will come to Jews and Gentiles alike through faith rather than obedience to Jewish laws

received through Moses (Romans 3: 29 – 30). In this admonition Paul seeks to emphasise that there is equal opportunity for salvation for all, and in effect challenges the claimed specialness of Jews as the ‘chosen race’. It is this biblical message that the author wishes to extend to developed countries. The immediate question that arises is whether leaders in the developed countries would take a biblical message seriously enough to make it the basis of foreign policy. One is immediately reminded of a British prime minister who publicly declared, ‘we don’t do religion’ when asked what he, as a practicing Christian was doing to help the poor of Africa. The point he was making was that strategic interests in international relations mattered more than religious morality or ideology. Assuming that policy makers in the developed countries did undergo the ‘circumcision of the heart’ and all trade barriers were removed, aid flowed, all debts were cancelled and economies of the poor countries began to grow there is still no guarantee that such economic growth would translate into a reduction of poverty for the generality of the population, given the rampant corruption and economic mismanagement in many Third World countries. There are very good examples of African countries which had robust economies at the time of independence but which were quickly reduced to basket cases soon after, largely because of mismanagement and corruption.

Throughout the work, the author underplays the role played by within-country factors in the development process, both as drivers or constraints while emphasising external relations. The reality is that the development process is influenced by international as well as internal factors.

By emphasizing the plight of the Anglican priest the impression is unfortunately created that the author thinks that priests are more deserving of higher living standards than their parishioners. One would question the basis of this thinking. Since priests are paid their stipends from what parishioners generate from their Sunday offerings, tithes and other income generating activities, it might have been expected that the discussion would centre around the economic empowerment of parishioners so that they can pay their priest adequately to afford a decent standard of living. The claim that the priest remains poor because of the profitable relationship that exists between missionaries and the leadership of the local church (p. 307) is of questionable merit and simply muddles up

the argument about the genesis of the poverty of the priest. One is inclined to ask what the nature of this ‘profitable relationship’ is and how it works to the disadvantage of the ordinary priest.

The failure to provide a clearly articulated *theology-based* model of development which would serve as an alternative to the ‘secular’ models which, as the author would argue, were imposed on the Third World by thinkers in the developed world is a major weakness of the book. The biblical message of mutual acceptance as contained in the *Letter to the Romans* cannot pass for a model of development. It remains what it is: a message, with no guarantee that it would be heeded.

Notwithstanding these observations, the work is a gallant effort by a theologian to engage in the development debate which for a long time has been viewed as the preserve of social scientists. The author should be commended for his effort. One hopes that the next edition of the book will have fewer grammatical and spelling mistakes.

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